

INDEPENDENCE FOR THE BLIND

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INDEPENDENCE FOR THE BLIND

New York State Provides Training and Education So Blind May Help Themselves

The Vocational Rehabilitation Service of the State Department of Social Welfare is enabling hundreds of blind persons to become self-supporting, independent citizens through counselling, training and job placement. . . . Clients are helped toward emotional and physical adjustment to blindness and provided with necessary corrective surgery. . . . Subsistence is furnished during training period when needed. . . . VRS is constantly seeking new job opportunities which blind people can perform satisfactorily. . . .

The average sighted person probably considers blindness the greatest possible detriment to earning a living and to enjoying life. Because we receive more sensations through our eyes than through any other organs the idea of living in total darkness is thoroughly terrifying. There is no denying that blindness constitutes a formidable handicap, but insofar as earning a living is concerned, the affliction is not nearly so catastrophic as it was only a few years ago. Because of new concepts in social welfare, training and job performance techniques, thousands of vigorous citizens, normal in every respect save vision, now lead useful, well adjusted lives. Today some blind person is moving briskly along nearly every avenue of life. Literature, the arts, the church, law, politics, commerce, trade, agriculture, even sports—all have their successful blind practitioners.

• **Vocational Rehabilitation Service**—New York State is doing its part to make happy, productive members of society of its blind people through the Vocational Rehabilitation Service of the Commission for the Blind, State Department of Social Welfare. VRS, financed jointly from federal and state funds, is headquartered in Albany and operates under the supervision of Director Herbert R. Brown. Six area offices, located in Albany, New York City (which has two), Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse, serve the whole State. Each area office is staffed by special counsellors with long experience in problems peculiar to the blind. VRS states the objective of its rehabilitation services boldly: "To find employment for every qualified blind person in New York State who can be placed in a job he can hold on a competitive basis with sighted persons and on his own merits as a trained, skilled, productive worker."

The premise that blind persons should compete on even terms with sighted people for jobs sounds almost fantastic but VRS experience has shown that it is not. As a matter of fact this employment concept is the foundation of modern theory on aiding the blind. VRS is convinced that satisfactory adjustment for a blind person must be predicated on that self-respect stemming only from self-support and self-sufficiency. The old theory was simply to help the blind, which meant direct financial aid, support in a public institution or other forms of public

Blind power machine operator is able to support herself by sewing in New York City's giant textile industry. Machine is equipped with special guides to feed cloth into machine.



assistance. The new concept practiced by VRS is to help the blind help themselves, by means of training and education so that they may earn their own way and lead independent lives.

• **Blindness Defined**—Blind people seeking State aid are often referred to VRS by one of the several private agencies concerned with aiding the blind, some are sent by physicians and others come on their own initiative. Each client submits his application in duplicate. VRS may request an eye report made by a qualified physician which certifies that the client's vision is sufficiently impaired to bring him within the State's definition of blindness. This examination is at State expense. To be eligible for rehabilitation the client's vision may not exceed 20/200 in his better eye after all possible correction. This means roughly that he will be able to see at about twenty feet what a normal person could see at 200 feet. Approximately 60 percent of the people properly classifiable as blind do possess some degree of vision. Actually in exceptional cases of so-called "tubular" vision the person may be able to read fine print but his line of sight is so highly channelized that he is greatly handicapped.

• **Shortcuts by Surgery**—The next step is a thorough physical check-up including special ear examinations and cardiographs when necessary. The report of this examination is studied in detail and any corrective measure which may minimize the client's handicap is taken. Sometimes eye surgery at this stage will remove a person from the blind classification and enable him to earn his living without the need for additional training. A small fruit farmer in upstate New York was spraying his orchard when the spray hose exploded and dashed a blinding caustic solution into his eyes. For three years before VRS was set up he was on public relief. VRS decided that surgery would help. Three operations, including two corneal transplants, removed him from the category of the blind and today he is happily managing his fruit farm independent of public aid. Thus a comparatively small outlay for surgery eliminated a large expenditure for training and allowed this man to continue the profitable use of already-acquired skills.

Another example is that of an auto mechanic who owned and operated a

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The per capita cost of accomplishing the rehabilitation was \$396.41.

One thousand eight-nine received training in trade, technical, commercial and professional schools, and 163 received on-the-job training. Two hundred fourteen were trained for professional and managerial occupations, 503 for clerical and sales occupations, 78 for service occupations, 12 for agricultural pursuits, 191 for skilled occupations, 216 for semi-skilled occupations and 38 for unskilled occupations.

For the 3,042 rehabilitated cases, 2,960 medical and 181 psychiatric examinations were secured, and 858 cases were given psychological tests as a part of diagnosis.

Physical restoration services were provided for 441 cases. These services included medical, psychiatric, surgical and dental treatment, physiotherapy, occupational and work therapy, and hospitalization.

Prosthetic appliances of various types were furnished to 415 cases, and repairs to appliances for 15 cases.

• Services for Industrially Injured—

Industrially injured workers, entitled to benefits under the Workmen's Compensation Law, are entitled to such rehabilitation services as they need. These services are especially provided for through the enactment of the amendment to the Compensation Law which establishes the fund from which the expenditures for rehabilitation of industrial accident cases are made. Under a provision of the State Rehabilitation Law it is the duty of the Workmen's Compensation Board to refer all industrial accident cases who need rehabilitation services. Compensation insurance carriers as well as self-insured employers are also referring injured workers for rehabilitation services.

Under the terms of an agreement between the Workmen's Compensation Board and the State Education Department, the Division of Rehabilitation has for a number of years been investigating and reporting on applications for advance awards, lump sum payments of compensation and non-scheduled adjustments of compensation whenever the use of the Compensation funds would enable the claimant to establish a small business enterprise or where there is some other rehabilitation service anticipated.

During the past fiscal year the Division made the following investigations and reports concerning requests for advance awards and lump-sum settlements of compensation, including final adjustments of non-scheduled awards.

Investigations of 224 advance-awards and lump-sum requests were made and reports rendered with recommendations to the Workmen's Compensation Board. These requests amount to \$553,109.53 or an average of \$2,022.81 each. Advance awards, amounting to \$174,501.47 were recommended to meet necessitous circumstances, and it was recommended that \$64,444.21 be not granted. Lump sum settlements amounting to \$181,268.70 were recommended and requests amounting to \$132,895.15 were adversely reported upon. One hundred forty-seven of the 224 claimants accepted the rehabilitation service.

Investigations of 205 proposed non-schedule adjustments were made and reports rendered with recommendations to the Workmen's Compensation Board. These requests amounted to \$673,003.88 or an average of \$3,282.95 each. Recommendations were made that awards amounting to \$502,340.63 should be paid in full and that \$24,249.33 should be paid bi-weekly; no recommendations were made concerning awards amounting to \$72,000.00 as no rehabilitation service could be rendered the claimants, and requests amounting to \$74,413.92 were adversely reported upon. One hundred fifty-nine of the 205 claimants accepted the rehabilitation service.

Also under the terms of an agreement with the Compensation Board all claimants who are being supplied with artificial appliances by the insurance carriers or self-insured employers are referred to the Rehabilitation Division for advice and recommendation regarding the most suitable type of artificial appliance needed by the claimant in order to engage in the type of work for which he is being prepared.

• Service to Employers — A number of surveys, made during recent years, have compared the production, absenteeism, accident rate, and labor turnover of groups of handicapped workers with groups of non-impaired workers engaged in the same type of work. These surveys, the most extensive of which was made by the Bureau of Statistics of the United States Department of Labor, indicated that handicapped workers compare very favor-

ably in all of these categories with non-handicapped workers. The National Association of Manufacturers and United States Chamber of Commerce have recently published the results of a survey undertaken by them, indicating similar results.

Experience has indicated definitely that persons with physical disabilities, if properly trained and adjusted into the right type of work, are no longer handicapped so far as employment is concerned. The employment of handicapped workers in industry does not affect compensation and insurance premiums since the latter are based upon the type of work performed and the accident experience of the industry. For these reasons it would seem that employers should not hesitate to engage the services of handicapped workers who have been provided with necessary rehabilitation services, and who are being adjusted into the correct type of work.

Employers, therefore, should refer to the State Rehabilitation Division any handicapped workers who apply for employment; some of whom may need some training to equip them for the work available in the industry, and some of whom might be provided with physical restoration services.

An important amendment to the Workmen's Compensation Law is the "second injury" clause. Fully understood, this provision can do much to facilitate opportunities for continued employment for workers who have already sustained a permanent disability. The Division is anxious to cooperate effectively with employers in working out suitable job adjustments on a basis of complete medical information, to the end that both the handicapped individual, industry, and the community will benefit.



This woman injured both hands severely while working on her cleaning job. Under medical supervision she was given work therapy to strengthen her hands so that she was able to find employment as a house manager for a private family.

small garage with average earnings of \$55.00 a week. A childhood injury had destroyed one eye, and in his 60th year a cataract had reduced the vision in his remaining eye so that he could no longer work satisfactorily. His earnings dropped to around \$15.00 per week and he was forced to apply for public assistance. VRS arranged for surgery which restored the use of his eye. He is now earning about \$40.00 weekly and is continuing to utilize his tools, equipment and skills and to capitalize on the good will he had previously established in business. A high school student experimenting with a home chemical set lost his sight and suffered severe facial burns from a chemical explosion. Through VRS, surgery was used to restore vision to one eye and to rebuild his facial features. His potential earning powers were greatly increased.

These illustrations are not unusual but typical. They demonstrate that blind people with the aid of corrective surgery arranged by VRS can often continue to utilize the skills and training which they have already acquired.

• **Individual Counselling** — If corrective surgery will not restore or improve the client's sight the next step on his rehabilitation schedule is an initial interview with his counsellor which may take place in a VRS office or in the client's home if circumstances require it. The counsellor studies his client intensively. He may, with the client's permission, obtain pertinent information from other agencies which may have contacted the client—hospitals, clinics, schools or welfare organizations—so as to learn all he possibly can about the client's social, economic and educational background.

It is impossible to generalize about procedures for aiding the blind. VRS service follows no set pattern, has no hard and fast rules for the very good reason that no two clients are exactly alike. Their problems and temperaments range as widely and differ as much as those of sighted persons, and it is up to counsellor to fashion a plan suited to the individual with whom he is working.

The length of time involved in this interview and planning stage of rehabilitation will vary with individual clients. With a few, a single thorough interview may be enough to start a plan of action, while with others this planning period may stretch over a period of a year.

• **Client's Attitude** — A vital part of the counsellor's job is to determine ex-

Blind persons should be able to write in ordinary script at least well enough to sign their names legibly. The board, prepared by Boy Scouts, enables client to learn letters by touch so that she can reproduce them with pen or pencil.

actly his client's mental and emotional attitude towards his blindness. A recently blinded person has suffered a violent emotional shock and periods of severe depression are to be expected. People with normal, mature personalities usually recover from these depressions with sympathetic guidance and are able to adjust emotionally to their affliction. A few will be unable to accept emotionally the fact that they are blind and may require psychotherapy which will be furnished at State expense when needed and desired by the client.

Occasionally VRS is confronted with the problem of a client who refuses to give up hope that surgery will eventually restore his vision. This person may have been the patient of a doctor who failed to tell him of his real condition, or may have been given false hopes by friends and relatives out of mistaken pity. Such clients usually take the position that there is no need to adjust to blindness since the condition is only temporary. Persuading such a person to adopt a practical course requires all the counsellor's tact and knowledge of human psychology.

During this counselling period the counsellor secures the complete confidence of his client, establishing a rapport so that they work and think in close harmony. They talk about the client's past work experience, his education or vocational training and his likes and dislikes. The counsellor studies his emotional pattern, stability and temperament. From these talks the pair seek to work out for the client a long range plan to include his social, mental and employment objectives. The counsellor is careful that every major decision is actually reached by the blind person himself because it is essential to his future happiness that he learn to be independent and to think for himself.

• **Physical Adjustment** — While in the counselling stage the client is taught to adjust physically to the sighted world. It is important that he be taught "foot travel" which is the process of moving around satisfactorily with a cane on streets, public transportation, etc., without aid from anyone. He must learn to dress himself, bathe,



shave, use a knife and fork and perform normal personal care. It may be necessary for him to learn to read and write braille. All of this special training is purchased for him by the State. A well-trained blind person should be able to mix socially with sighted people without any self-consciousness and without any need for special concessions or aid from anyone.

Various private agencies maintain extensive social and recreational programs for the blind. They have parties and dances and maintain special facilities for sports like swimming, rowing, riding, bowling and skating. VRS recommends these activities to its clients but urges that they spend part of their leisure time in the company of sighted persons so that they learn to feel at ease wherever they may be.

During his training in physical and social adjustment the client may be furnished with any special appliances or equipment which he may require. Some blind people use the famous "seeing-eye" dogs from Morristown, N. J. as guides and companions in moving about city streets. These carefully trained dogs, usually German Shepherds, are furnished at a nominal cost of \$150.00 by a private institution and the blind person goes to Morristown for a month to learn to work with his dog. Some people with strong egos are unable to subordinate themselves sufficiently to a working dog to make the relationship worthwhile. VRS neither recommends nor disapproves of the use of a dog, taking the position that the matter depends on the individual. In any case, VRS believes that the client should be thoroughly trained in foot travel so that he can move around without help if necessary.

• **Training and Education** — When it is decided what the client's method of earning a living should logically be, he is given any training or education which may be necessary to the accomplishment of his objective. This may amount to a short course in a vocational training school, an on-the-job training period, or may include a full undergraduate course or professional training. Sometimes it is difficult to locate the type of training or education which a blind person needs and an important function of VRS is searching out or developing educational and training opportunities. VRS maintains no schools of its own and all services for the blind (except counselling) is purchased. If the client needs subsistence during his training period it may be furnished out of State funds up to a maximum of \$30 per week.

Students at colleges or clerical schools are furnished text books in braille and may in certain cases have the services of readers who are paid by the State. These readers may read into recording machines while the student is attending class so that he can play back the recording for his instruction at his own convenience. The recordings are on plastic discs or tapes, and the student can make notes on the discs with a stylus in braille if he desires. The New York City Public Library has a branch at 127 West 25th Street, with books in braille and on recorded disks for the blind.

• **Employment Opportunities**—Manpower shortages during the war created many new job opportunities for the blind, particularly in industry. Formerly it was thought that industrial jobs were not suitable for blind workers because many such jobs are more or less hazardous and most of them seem to require vision in performance. Employers are sometimes wary of blind employees fearing that accident rates will rise and insurance rates increase, but experience has demonstrated that a blind person properly selected for and oriented to his job is no more apt to have an accident than a sighted worker. Many blind people went into war industries to do manual assembly work, perform testing operations and do limited machine operation. Satisfactory performance of these jobs has opened whole new fields for the blind worker. It is now an acknowledged fact that a properly adjusted and adequately trained blind person can successfully hold his own with sighted workers in production quotas, and in some industries even excel sighted

persons. Blind workers who may not be quite so rapid and skillful have compensative factors in their persistence of effort and in their low absentee rate.

VRS points out that a properly trained and adjusted blind person understands that he is a production unit, like all other persons in the plant, and that he and the machine that he operates must fulfill a quota of production, like all other workers. No properly adjusted blind person will wish or tolerate exceptions in his favor. He will insist on holding up his end.

VRS is constantly engaged in research to discover industrial jobs for blind people so that they may depart from such traditional occupations as basketry, weaving and broom making. Today more and more blind workers are employed at such complex industrial jobs as lacing cables in the new and growing electronics field. Many master several operations which permits the employer flexibility in work assignments.

Many blind persons are ideally suited to jobs in clerical fields, such as typing and dictaphone operation. Switchboards equipped with special appliances may be successfully operated by the blind. There are thousands of blind people in the professions including law, the clergy, medicine, social welfare and teaching. Music has always been a special field for people without sight. They perform on concert stages, play in bands, sing, teach voice or music, even tune and repair pianos. VRS has worked out a splendid training program for the blind with a large independent piano tuner.

• **Job Performance Insured** — When a client's training or education is complete, VRS attempts to place him in a suitable job. The agency maintains close contact with his employer; it may send a field representative with the client to help orient him to the job, see that he is provided with any special appliances which he may need and generally get him off to a good start. For thirty days VRS keeps a close check on his performance to be sure that the employer is satisfied with his work. If it should appear that the employee's service might be unsatisfactory he would be recalled for placement in another job, but this procedure is so rare as to be negligible. At the end of 30 days of satisfactory service the client is considered rehabilitated and his case is marked closed. Of course it may be reopened if necessary. Some of the typical placements made by VRS for the fiscal year ending June

30, 1949 included—

- 12 Professional positions — average weekly salary \$46.42.
- 4 Semi-Professional — average \$35.00 weekly.
- 34 Stand and small business operators — \$32.09.
- 15 Canvassers — average \$30.73.
- 25 Assemblers — \$31.28.
- 16 Dictating Machine Operators — \$38.13.
- 6 Office workers — \$27.33.
- 5 Messengers — \$29.60.
- 7 Sewing Machine Operators — \$24.71.
- 20 Power Machine Operators — \$34.20.
- 40 Unskilled workers all types — \$33.58.
- 2 Piano Tuners — \$33.50.
- 5 Building Service workers — \$42.20.
- 4 Agricultural Workers — \$48.00.

The wages range from \$10.00 to \$100.00 per week with an average salary for all placements of \$33.67.

• **VRS Case Load** — The average length of training for these workers was four months and the turnover in placements has been less than 3 percent. In every case the turnover arose from changed economic conditions or plant requirements and not in any instance from unsatisfactory work on the part of the blind employee.

At present VRS has a total of 547 cases. Eleven of these clients are in training and physical restoration, 18 in physical restoration, 135 in training and 115 people are awaiting employment. A total of 48 are in employment but have not yet completed their 30-day trial periods. So far, 206 clients have been placed in employment this year and the agency has a backlog of 356 applications which are being serviced as rapidly as possible.

VRS states that the average over-all cost for each rehabilitant actually placed in a job is \$660.00 and that the average cost over-all per case handled is \$307.00. The agency estimates that its total case service expenditure for the year 1950 will be approximately \$200,000.

An examination of the multiple return in earnings and social usefulness bought by each dollar spent for rehabilitation services brings quick appreciation of the excellent investment which the VRS program represents for New York State's economy. Many blind people who were once dependent on public funds for their support now pay substantial income taxes, thereby helping to lighten the load for others.—R.C.G.

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